



DVAR TZEDEK:
Inspired by the Jewish commitment to justice for 30 years

AJWS
at **30**

The 5776 (2015-2016) cycle of Dvar Tzedek is a special one. To commemorate AJWS's 30th anniversary, we are sharing a selection of some of our favorite commentaries from past years. Each legacy commentary will be introduced with a related reflection on AJWS's work and contemporary issues.

Introductory Reflection

In his 2012 Dvar Tzedek, Rabbi David Singer writes about the census of the Israelites in *Parashat Bamidbar*. A *midrash* on the *parashah* explains that God counts the Israelites as if they were jewels in his possession, periodically checking them to ensure they are safe. For Singer—and other contemporary commentators—“the poignancy” [of this *midrash*] “is marred by the fact that the census accounts for only 600,000 adult men; so evidently missing from the ‘lovingly counted jewels’ is fifty percent of the population—its women.” While there are historical reasons for women’s absence from the Torah’s census, Singer notes that “rationalizing women’s exclusion... cannot erase the uncomfortable value judgement on women’s worth... nor does it justify the perpetuation of this exclusion in societies today.”

Women are undervalued around the globe, but especially in the developing world. One of the most striking examples is the practice of early and child marriage, which violates the human rights of roughly 15 million girls around the world. Everywhere child marriage occurs, the practice deprives adolescent girls of the freedom to make informed and independent choices about their lives and bodies. The presence of child marriage in a community usually indicates that women and girls face tremendous inequality—and sends a strong message to girls and women that their needs and desires don’t count as much as those of men.

Yet, many girls today are working to reverse this trend. In Maharashtra, India, 14-year-old Mangal Waikar’s parents pressured her into a marriage she didn’t want. As she began raising her own children, she wondered: how could she keep them from following the same path? She gained the confidence to speak out when she began working with MASUM, a women’s rights organization supported by AJWS. Mangal and her daughter, Shital, learned how to advocate for their rights—and started demanding a better future for girls throughout their community. Organizations like MASUM are helping women and girls throughout India access new opportunities and overturn old ideas about what they can do with their lives.

As Rabbi Singer writes, “We must write women into the *midrash*, insisting that their value is included in the total. Each person is a jewel—men and women alike.”

To hear more about Mangal’s story, watch AJWS’s video [“Something Different for Our Daughters”](#); and read Rabbi Singer’s piece below for deeper insights into this week’s *parashah*.

Parashat Bamidbar 5776

By Rabbi David Singer
June 11, 2016
(Reprinted from May 26, 2012)

In the beginning of the book of Bamidbar, Moses is instructed to call together all of the Israelites in the wilderness in order to undertake a census of the people. Midrash Bamidbar Rabbah explains the significance of this census by way of a parable about a man who has a box filled with jewels.¹ From time to time, he would take them out and count them, in order to check that they were safe and intact and to marvel at their beauty. Bamidbar Rabbah teaches that, like the character of this parable, God expresses Divine love for each person through the censuses of the Israelites—counting them and marveling at their beauty.

This message is powerful, with important ramifications for the building of a just society based on equality for all. And yet, its poignancy is marred by the fact that the census accounts only for 600,000 adult men; so evidently missing from the “lovingly counted jewels” is fifty percent of the population—its women.

Many historical and practical reasons can explain the absence of women from the census: Most ancient texts, the Bible included, focus nearly exclusively on the males of a community. In addition, this census was for the purposes of army recruitment, a male-only task in its time. But rationalizing women’s exclusion from the census cannot erase the uncomfortable value judgment on women’s worth that can be derived from the *midrash*, nor does it justify the perpetuation of this exclusion in societies today—from parts of the Jewish community to communities worldwide.

This is especially egregious throughout the Global South, where the wanton suppression of women’s rights and equality continues, either through law or custom—or both. Because of their enforced second-class status in many countries, women remain hidden from society, unable to be counted in their nations’ development.

According to the United Nations Population Fund, women in many developing countries still lack rights to own land and inherit property, obtain access to credit, attend school and earn income in the job market, free from discrimination.² This suppression of women’s rights contributes directly to the high rates of early marriage, lack of education and vulnerability to gender-based violence that exist throughout the Global South. Without basic freedoms, women are left at the whims of society, unable to determine their own fates.

Yet there are many organizations working to reverse this trend. In India, AJWS grantee Girls Rise India³ works to empower women through education and financial support, to enable them to start their own businesses. Similarly, an organization called Shaheen labors to bring equality specifically to women in India’s Muslim population. Its founder, Jameela Nishat, recognized that this sub-group was particularly vulnerable to the ills of disempowerment. Her organization, run by women and girls *for* women and girls, uses an integrated, rights-based approach to support, educate and empower the marginalized women and girls of local Muslim communities to lead lives free from

¹ Bamidbar Rabbah 4:2.

² “Promoting Gender Equality: Political Empowerment,” UNFPA. <http://www.unfpa.org/gender/empowerment3.htm>

³ The name of this organization has been changed to protect its members, who are operating in a highly sensitive environment.

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discrimination, violence and poverty. According to Jameela, “If girls are empowered, it spreads education . . . when education spreads, there is the possibility of changing mindsets . . . stopping violence.”⁴

When we support organizations working to empower women, enabling them to raise their voices and express their ideas, we help to enable entirely half of the population in many areas of the Global South to realize their rights and contribute to their nations’ futures. It would serve communities worldwide well to recognize the mistake of excluding half a community from representation, significance and importance. All nations, but in particular those in the developing world, need all the resources they can muster in order to overcome poverty, disease and oppression. When given the chance to take active roles in their communities, women have demonstrated that they are powerful drivers of change.

Parashat Bamidbar teaches us that numbers matter, that each individual has significance. But by excluding women, its message of equality falls short. We must write women into the *midrash*, insisting that their value is included in the total. Each person is a jewel—men and women alike. When they are allowed to shine equally, to be counted together, a mosaic of beautiful stones will shine forth from each land.



Rabbi David Singer is the Director of Hillel of San Diego at UCSD. Previously, he was the Founding Director of [Makom](#), a young spiritual community in Dallas, TX. Named by *The Jewish Daily Forward* as one of [American’s Most Inspiring Rabbis](#), David is a graduate of Clal, The National Jewish Center for Learning and Leadership’s Clergy Leadership Incubator and a member of [Rabbis Without Borders](#). David graduated from the Ziegler School of Rabbinic Studies in Los Angeles in 2012. David can be reached at dsinger@hillelsd.org.

⁴ “Empowering Girls as Agents of Change: A Human Rights-Based Approach to U.S. Development Policy,” *American Jewish World Service*, January 2011, p. 6. This policy paper provides a more complete analysis of women’s empowerment in the Global South.

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